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VITA AYALA IS THE CHANGING FACE OF COMICS, AND

by Vita Ayala/Black Mask Studios

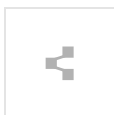
THEY'RE HERE TO STAY

Contributed by



How busy is Vita Ayala? To be honest, they're not even certain. The comic book writer and creator has virtually exploded onto the scene in the last two years and currently has so many projects in the works, they couldn't confidently confirm exactly how many there are. "Literally, people tell me what I'm doing," Ayala said, during an interview with SYFY FANGRRLS in early

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March. “I’m like, ‘Oh really? That sounds nice.’”

We settled on a least four, though that number fluctuates constantly as they are hired to contribute to various anthologies or guest on other books, something they’ve done a number of times over the last few years, racking up work with such iconic characters as Wonder Woman, Batgirl, and the women of *Bitch Planet*.

But it’s their own work that has gained them all that notoriety. Their first creator-owned book, *The Wilds*, which was published through Black Mask Studios, has a collected edition out in July, while their second work, *Submerged*, published through Vault Comics, recently came out in trade paperback. Meanwhile, Ayala launched the first solo outing of the Valiant Comics superhero Livewire and was just announced as the new writer on the Dynamite Comics reboot of Xena.

Needless to say, it’s been a busy year, and their sudden visibility might make you think they came from nowhere. That couldn’t be further from the truth. They’ve been working behind the scenes in the industry since 2013,



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starting on projects at Black Mask, and while *The Wilds* is their first published work from the company, it is actually their third project. Their first was never published, and their second, a book called *Our Work Fills the Pews*, has been going through retooling over the last couple years, and is still expected to be released.

But their real connection to the industry goes back much further even than that — more than a decade, actually, to the day they first walked into Forbidden Comics in New York City and demanded a job. “I'd been arguing about work versus school,” said Ayala, recalling the day they decided to do something about their frustration. “So I marched up to one of the managers, and I was like 'You should hire me, I'm here all the time, and I know your stock.' And weirdly enough, the manager turned and went ‘You love anime and manga, right?’ I was like, ‘Absolutely.’ ‘OK, alright, come by to fill out paperwork tomorrow.’”

Though it may have surprised them at the time, this tactic of knowing what they bring to a situation and presenting that worth without hesitation or qualification has become quite the contributing factor in their

continued success throughout their career. “I feel like I just don't know any other way to be, so I'm sure that's what my pitches look like, where I come in, I'm like ‘Here, you should make this,’” related Ayala, with a laugh. “It's 80-percent hard work, and then 20-percent luck, and so working and being angry behind the scenes leads to the opportunity to be like ‘This is what I have to offer.’”

And what they have to offer has turned out to be a swath of comics which not only wrestle with universal concerns of survival and loss and community, but also reveal a strong desire to present the world both as it is, and as they have come to understand it. Among the strongest influences on their writing is their home city of New York, a city with a multicultural population and wildly diverse neighborhoods that have shaped their world building just as much as major events have shaped the city itself.

“There are big events in people's lives that pretty much, there's a before and after. And that was definitely one of them,” Ayala said of Hurricane Sandy, the storm which flooded New York in 2012, knocking out power to

Vault Comics

huge areas and wreaking havoc on the metropolitan area. That event not only affected Ayala directly, as someone living and working in the city at the time but also their work. *Submerged*, which takes place in a flooded version of New York, was a direct result of their experiences during that storm.

“Being someone that grew up in New York has definitely affected how I feel, and how I write. New York is an incredibly diverse city, so there are certain things that I have had to deal with, or not deal with because of that, and that has shaped the way that I want to create books,” they continued. “I grew up speaking Spanish as well as English, and that has affected me, and there's a huge population of Latin American people in New York. I grew up within walking distance of Chinatown, and so when I think of the city, I think of my walk to Chinatown.”

The diversity of the city, and Ayala's unique experience there, even affected the way they read comics. “I misidentify white people as brown people in comics all the time,” they explained. “For me, from the time that I was a kid because I'm a Puerto Rican, and so I know that brown people come in all shades, and sizes, and shapes. And so I used to think

that Wonder Woman was Puerto Rican, so I was like ‘Oh yeah, Puerto Rican people are in comics.’”

Artist Khary Randolph

Perhaps it is that technically incorrect understanding of characters in comics which has contributed to

Ayala’s personal desire to include as diverse an array of experience as they can. After all, Ayala themselves comes from a vast array of intersections. They are queer, gender non-binary, Afro-Latinx, New Yorker, cat parent, and each of these experiences have become vital not only to the characters and the stories they create but to the way they approach the concept of creating characters from outside their own unique experience. “I don't make it a point to be like ‘Alright, here's a checkbox, I need to have a black person, a Chinese person, a Native American person’ I don't do that,” they say about their creative process. “But I do look holistically at something, and go ‘There are perspectives that would make this a better story. Who is not here?’ And I think that's important. ‘Cause otherwise I think it gets boring.”

This process has actually led to the creation

of a number of characters within Ayala's own work that might never have existed otherwise, and it's a thought process many comics fans from marginalized backgrounds would appreciate other creators adopt in their own work. It is also the argument at the center of ongoing debates surrounding legacy characters and the way those characters may change (or not) if you altered something about them personally, be it their gender, their socio-economic background, their race, or their sexuality.

Who would Ayala change if given the chance?

"I would actually make America Chavez into Captain America. Like, right now," they tell me, without hesitation. It's clear they've thought a lot about this. "I feel like Captain America's supposed to be this — the ideal of whatever's going on, like Steve Rogers, he's the good boy, and he's very respectful, and he's very intelligent, but he also is very empathetic, and all this stuff, and I'm like, America represents America right now. Quite literally. She's a queer brown lady who is an immigrant, she is literally the person who is fighting the hardest right now. She should have the f*ckin' shield."

But those thoughts are not universal and many comics fans, mostly, though not exclusively, those from straight, white male backgrounds, find any attempts by a major comic book company to alter the nature of a long established character to be a form of betrayal. But Ayala has thoughts about them too. “I think, if I'm being generous the answer is, listen, no one's gonna take away the stories that already exist, but changing up who gets to wear the mantle gives more opportunities for people to see each other as a hero, or an antihero, or whatever, and no one is harmed by that. Only good comes from that,” they explain, continuing. “Having Jane Foster be Thor doesn't lessen Thor; having Sam Wilson be Captain America doesn't lessen Cap in any way. In fact, what it does, is it makes the mantle mean something more. Because it is more accessible.”

Ayala was party to a similar change when they were given the task of launching Livewire's solo book, not only launching a brand new series at a publisher like Valiant but taking on an established character who, for the first time in her history, was a woman of color. “Here you have this character who's one of the most intelligent, most powerful,

and most dangerous people in the Valiant Universe, and they made her a hero, and I'm like 'Yes, they need that. Black people need that,'" Ayala says, thrilled to be discussing a character that obviously means so much to them. "So to be able to be a part of the legacy of the character, and also be able to be a part of giving her her own solo title was absolutely an honor, it was awesome."

Credit: Dynamite Entertainment

And now they have another opportunity to bring their unique flair to a long established character when Dynamite launches their brand new *Xena* title. They didn't reveal much about their plans during our conversation, other than the fact that they have been a massive fan of the character since their '90s-era television series was in its heyday. One thing is for certain though, it will likely mark a turn to something a little different for Ayala. After all, the world we live in today is markedly different from the one where they got their start.

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“It's easier to tell post-apocalyptic stories when you're not living in a time where you might think they come true. And we started working on all of those before we thought they would come true,” Ayala says, when asked if we can expect more tales from a post-apocalypse. “And now I want to tell stories that are a lot more hopeful.”